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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine children's perceptions of authority figures as a function of the variables of sex, age, ethnic group and socio-economic status (SES). The authority figures included policeman, principal, teacher, father, mother, and overall (cumulative effects of all authority). Questions from the Caldwell Preschool Inventory were administered to 90 preschool children. A modification of this instrument was administered to 526 elementary school children (616--total population). Responses were categorized: threatening, protective, ambivalent, or neutral. Interrater agreement was greater than .90 in all cases. Analysis of the data demonstrated that for preschoolers, teachers and overall were more threatening to boys than to girls, and that teacher, policeman, father and overall were more threatening to lower "SES" children than to middle "SES" children. The elementary school sample demonstrated that threat scores for the principal and overall were greater for intermediate age children than for primary children. The findings suggest that perceptions of authority figures are probably initially modeled by the particular subculture of the child and that these perceptions are subject to change. (Author/AJ)

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Attitudes of Preschool and Elementary School Children to Authority Figures

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Several studies were found in the literature which are relevant to the concerns of the present study. Dubin and Dubin (1965) have summarized data from 56 studies dealing with children's social perceptions, and have organized their generalizations around children's perception of parental and non-parental authority figures. They state that "...from a methodological standpoint, the empirical literature appears inadequate to support broad generalizations by virtue of scatter in theoretical interest and limited research technologies employed..." Despite these limitations, certain of their conclusions are relevant to the hypotheses of the present study: (1) in a wide age range, mother is preferred over father, to whom more power is ascribed especially by boys; (2) in relation to age and sex, perceptions (a) become more realistic with increasing age, with parents losing much of the power previously ascribed to them, and (b) perceptions are differentiated by sex, with girls more favorably oriented towards parents than boys: (3) cultural influences lead to quantitative differences in the perception of parental behaviors. No evidence was found to support the belief that there are qualitative differences as well. For example, Hess and Torney (1962) found that Catholic children reported one or the other in their family was boss in their family with significantly higher frequency that children from Protestant homes. (Dubin and Dubin page 828). (4) As regards social class, the same authors who investigated the perception of authority structure within the families of 1861 children between the ages of 7 through 15 found no difference in children's perception by social class.

The purpose of this study was to examine children's perceptions of authority figures as a function of the variables of sex, age, ethnic groups and socio-economic status (SES). The authority figures included policeman, principal, teacher, father and mother. The hypothesis to be tested were arranged by two samples: pre-school children and elementary school children.

1. Pre-school sample
   A. Boys will obtain significantly higher threat scores than will girls for all authority figures.
   B. Lower "SES" children will obtain significantly higher threat scores than will middle "SES" children for all authority figures.
2. Elementary school sample
   A. Boys will obtain significantly higher threat scores than will girls for all authority figures.
   B. Lower "SES" children will obtain significantly higher threat scores than will middle "SES" children for all authority figures.
   C. Black children will obtain significantly higher threat scores than will white or Puerto Rican children for all authority figures.
   D. Older children (grades five and six) will obtain significantly higher threat scores than will younger children (grades one and two) for all authority figures.

Procedures

1. Pre-school sample

Four questions from the Caldwell Pre-School Inventory (1967) were administered to a sample of 90 pre-school children.

1. What does a policeman do?
2. What does a teacher do?
3. What does a mother do?
4. What does a father do?

All responses were recorded verbatim. For purposes of reliability, or inter-judge agreement, five judges independently categorized the responses as: "threatening", "protective" or neither. The response was left in the sample only when agreement as to its appropriate category was reached by four out of five judges. The procedure resulted in the following inter-judge agreement for each authority figure:

policeman - 70%
teacher - 77%
father - 86%
mother - 65%

Upon further analysis it was found that the percentage agreement was highly varied between "threatening" and "protective" responses. In all cases the agreement of threat responses was over 90%. As a result, the categories of "neither" and "protective" were collapsed to "non-threatening", which changed the percentage of agreement to over 90%.

The Caldwell inventory was designed for pre-school children and did not include the authority figure of the principal. As a result new statements

had to be designed for the elementary school sample. The wording of the elementary school questions were deliberately open-ended to stimulate the student to enumerate more than one function of the authority figure.

The following statements were included:

1. Tell all the things you think of when I say policeman.
2. Tell all the things you think of when I say principal.
3. Tell all the things you think of when I say teacher.
4. Tell all the things you think of when I say father.
5. Tell all the things you think of when I say mother.
6. If you meet a friend and want to know how he feels about his parents, what questions would you ask him?

Statement six was constructed in order to gather more data of a descriptive nature. The six statements were pre-tested using 83 elementary school children who were not included in the study. From their responses criteria to fit the categories of "threatening" and "protective" were established. When these criteria were used in the actual study, more than 95% of the responses could be so categorized.

Sampling

1. Pre-school sample

The population for the pre-school sample was drawn from an OEO day care center, a Headstart class in a public school class and a private nursery school. The children in the OEO and Headstart groups were all designated as low "SES" by the school and the children in the private nursery school were

designated as middle "SES" children. Of the total of 90 children, 49 were of low "SES" and 41 were of middle "SES". Of the 49 low "SES" children, 30 were boys and 19 girls. Among the 41 middle "SES" children, 22 were boys and 19 were girls.

2. Elementary School Sample

The elementary school sample consisted of 526 children from two Nassau County, New York public school districts.

1st grade - 96

2nd grade - 60

3rd grade - 62

4th grade - 67

5th grade - 122

6th grade - 119

164 were low "SES" 362 were middle "SES", 193 were black, 40 were Puerto Rican and 303 were white. 240 were boys and 286 were girls.* The data was collected by students involved in the Experienced Teacher Fellowship Program at Hofstra, and included Ruth Wright, Jeanette Fox and Vivian Goldman.

Results

All analyses were based upon the percent of responses among the total group that were characterized as threatening or protective. Chi Square was used in all cases with an alpha level of .05.

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*For a complete breakdown of the elementary school sample, see appendix "A".

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1. Pre-School

A. Boys vs. girls: significant differences for teacher and overall, i.e. boys perceive the teacher as more threatening than girls.

Table showing results of Chi Square for Hypothesis IA Pre-school children by Boys vs. Girls.

Authority Figure	Obtained Chi Square	Significance Level
Overall	8.9	<.05*
Teacher	6.72	<.05*
Policeman	1.56	>.05
Father	.04	>.05
Mother	1.23	>.05

B. Lower "SES" vs. middle "SES": significant differences found for teacher, policeman, father and overall, i.e. teacher, policeman and father are perceived as more threatening by children in the lower "SES".

Table showing results of Chi Square for Hypothesis 1B - Pre-school children by "SES".

Authority Figure	Obtained Chi Square	Significance Level
Overall	40.46	<.05*
Teacher	27.67	<.05*
Policeman	15.73	<.05*
Father	6.28	<.05*
Mother	.32	> .05

2. Elementary School Sample

A. Boys vs. girls - no significant differences found.

Table showing results of Chi Square for Hypothesis 2A - Elementary school children by Boys vs. Girls.

Authority Figure	Obtained Chi Square	Significance Level
Overall	.5139	>.05
Policeman	2.519	>.05
Principal	0	>.05
Teacher	.0357	>.05
Father	.0087	>.05
Mother	.5139	>.05

B. Lower "SES" vs. middle "SES" - no significant differences found.

Table showing results of Chi Square for Hypothesis 2B - Elementary school children by "SES".

Authority Figure	Obtained Chi Square	Significance Level
Overall	.1162	>.05
Policeman	.3265	>.05
Principal	.3235	>.05
Teacher	0	>.05
Father	0	>.05
Mother	.0238	>.05

C. Black children vs. Puerto Rican and white children - no significant differences found.

Table showing results of Chi Square for Hypothesis 2C - Elementary school children by Ethnic group.

Authority Figure	Obtained Chi Square	Significance Level
Overall	.3058	> .05
Policeman	5.2542	> .05
Principal	.0744	> .05
Teacher	1.3183	> .05
Father	3.5161	> .05
Mother	.4747	> .05

When threat scores for black, white and Puerto Rican children were compared, it was found that authority figures outside the home received lower threat scores for Puerto Rican children in all cases with the exception of the teacher. Authority figures inside the home received higher threat scores for Puerto Rican children in all cases when compared to white and black children. However, these findings were not found to be significant.

D. Older children vs. younger children - significant differences were found for principal and overall. That is, the principal is perceived as more threatening by the older children.

Table showing results of Chi Square for Hypothesis 2D - Elementary school children - Grade level.

Authority	Obtained Chi Square	Significance Level
Overall	4.09	< .05*
Policeman	0	> .05
Principal	5.9962	< .05*
Teacher	1.764	> .05
Father	.1106	> .05
Mother	1.1	> .05

Discussion

Our findings have led us to digress somewhat and to ask two questions. What developmental changes does the perception of authority undergo in the course of childhood, and does parental power become a prototype for later perceptions of non-parental authority?

According to psychoanalytic theory the perception of parental power undergoes considerable change in the course of psychosexual development, beginning with "infantile omnipotence". This term refers to the infant's egocentric state, where the world centers on his own gratifications. He is totally dependent on the care of others who cater to his needs and who lend him a sense of magical power. A gradual shifting of power, or lessening of infantile omnipotence reaches its zenith at the conclusion of the oedipal stage when the parent is viewed as the residue of all power and one's very existence appears feasible only through an "identification with the agressor", i.e. "To accept his values, become like him, and repress the hostility they feel toward him" (Baldwin p. 366). Such a projection of total power unto the parent is almost as unrealistic as the infantile omnipotence of the earlier stage. It is, however, only another landmark in the acquisition of the more realistic perception of the power of the parent, who during the latency years are then perceived as declining in power. Parental power during these years and presumably beyond these years, is perceived as somewhat more protective, less threatening and, on the whole, more realistic.

One might hypothesize a parellel development for the perception of power outside the home (e.g., police, teacher and principal power) with one

omission of course: the stage of infantile omnipotence which occurs so early in life that no notice is taken of authority figures outside of the home. The earliest perceptions of authority could then be hypothesized to begin with the attribution of an ever-increasing threatening power onto authority figures outside the home, similar to the power of the parental prototype which lasts through the end of the oedipal crisis. Beginning with the latency period, the threat of authority would wane and perception of non-parental power would become more protective, less threatening and more realistic.

Our findings may be explained in the light of such theory: the pre-latency sample (pre-school) showed considerably more overall threat of authority then did the latency (elementary school) sample. The finding that greater threat was associated with lower class membership is however not explained by this hypothesis and must be looked for elsewhere.

Class differences in the perception of authority figures in our pre-school sample may reflect parental attitudes. Many investigators have concluded that the parent is the agent of transmission of cultural norms and attitudes, i.e. the "primary agent of socialization" (Hoffman and Hoffman 911). The lower class black family has been labeled as the "crucible of identity". (Rainwater in Deutsch pg.2.)

The study "The Authoritarian Personality" has generated a large number of new research studies dealing with variables active in the transmission of parental attitudes. Findings may be generalized as follows, "authoritarian child-rearing practices produce children with low frustration tolerance, repressed hostility, and other personality factors that make them susceptible

to ethnic intolerance" (Hoffman and Hoffman pg. 346). In terms of our study, a high threat score might fit into this cluster of the personality factors. However, neither intelligence nor educational level which have been found to be negatively related to authoritarian tendencies were controlled in these studies and the conclusions are therefore unacceptable. A reformulation of the parents' role is the transmission of attitudes and values is therefore necessary: the relation between parental authoritarianism and child ethnocentrism, as the relation between parent and child values generally, might thus be the result of a common dependence of both (parent and child) on intelligence and/or education. The problem of directional or causal interpretation might have to be shelved until further data become available.

An attempt to obtain such data has been made by Furstenberg (1967) who subjected these assumptions and causal interpretations to an empirical test by collecting independent data from 475 pairs of parents and children in the same family in order to measure the extent to which children share their parents attitudes and values. The most striking finding was that very little agreement was found to exist between parents and children on most attitudes. Our findings appear contradictory when viewed from a developmental position. If the pre-school sample showed a class difference in the perception of threat of authority and the elementary school did not show such a class difference, can one assume that the lack of difference continues through high school into adult life. If one were to assume this development and hypothesize that no difference existed within the class as between adults, then one must ask the following question: what influences were active upon the pre-school sample in direction

of a threatening perception of authority? In the absence of influences other than those of the family, the pre-school sample must get its perception of authority from the family. One might hypothesize that the present parent generation might have been shown to differ significantly as regards their perception of authority when analyzed for SES. This would mean that the school at this time with this generation has had the effect of neutralizing differences between social classes. It will remain a moot question and can only be elucidated as regards the further development of the perception of authority. We are suggesting continuation of the study through high school into adulthood.

Summary

This study found a definite shift in the perception of authority figures as children become older. At the pre-school level, the variables of sex and "SES" become predictors of perceptions of authority figures; however, these effects seem to "wash out" as children become older. Older children become more threatened by those outside the home and conversely more protected in their perception of those in the home.

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Appendix A: Breakdown of Elementary School Sample by Sex, Ethnic Group, Socio-Economic (SES) and Grade.

TOTAL GROUP

	MALE				FEMALE				MALE & FEMALE			
	*B	PR	W	TOTAL	B	PR	W	TOTAL	B	PR	W	TOTAL
Grade 1	14	1	29	44	17	4	31	52	31	5	60	96
2	5	4	17	26	5	4	25	34	10	8	42	60
3	1		34	35	6	1	20	27	7	1	54	62
4	12	4	13	29	17	2	10	38	29	6	32	67
5	16	4	33	53	28	5	36	69	44	9	69	122
6	35	2	16	53	27	9	30	66	62	11	46	119
	93	15	142	240	100	25	160	286	193	40	303	526

A. Lower Socio-Economic Status

Grade 1	11	1	4	16	8	4	9	21	19	5	13	37
2	5	4		9	5	4		9	10	8		18
3	1		2	3	4	1	4	9	5	1	6	12
4	11	4	2	17	15	1	2	18	26	5	4	35
5	8	4	1	13	12	5	3	20	20	9	4	33
6	11	2		13	6	9	1	16	17	11	1	29
				71				93				164

B. Middle Socio-Economic Status

Grade 1	3		25	28	9		22	31	12		47	59
2			17	17			25	25			42	42
3			32	32	2		16	18	2		48	50
4	1		11	12	2	1	17	20	3	1	28	32
5	8		32	40	16		33	49	24		65	89
6	24		16	40	21		29	50	45		45	90
				169				193				362

*B - Black
PR - Puerto Rican
W - White